THE PLEASURE OF GOD

January 12, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship

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"Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."
--Luke 3:22 (RSV)

Scripture
Isaiah 61:1-4
Luke 3:15-22

Garrison Keillor's bestseller, Lake Wobegon Days, is a book about - Grace, among other things. As you probably know, Keillor is the creator and star of a weekly American Public Radio program called "A Prairie Home Companion," which in the past several years has gathered about it a cult of zealots who wear Lake Wobegon T-shirts, buy tapes of Keillor's wonderful monologues, and swap gossip about his personal life. Among the zealots - and I am only on the periphery of this particular cult - the Saturday dinner hour broadcast time is inviolate, sacred space, dedicated to the unlikely activity of sitting and listening to the radio.

One of Keillor's more remarkable monologues was about "The Storm Home." It appears in the book, in a variation on the theme, as the "Storm Child." I discovered something of the Word in this story; a commentary on our text for this day - "And the Holy Spirit descended upon him...and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou are my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.'"

"After sixth grade, I left Sunnyvale and rode the bus in to Lake Wobegon High in town, where Mr. Detman was principal, a man who looked as if wild dogs were after him and a giant icicle hung over his head. Worry ate at Mr. Detman. He yelled at us when we ran downstairs, believing we would fall and break our necks and die on the landing. He imagined pupils choking on food and wouldn't allow meat in the lunchroom unless it was ground up. He had his own winter fear--that a blizzard would sweep in and school buses be marooned on the roads and children perish, so, in October, he announced that each pupil who lived in the country would be assigned a Storm Home in town. If a blizzard struck during school, we'd go to our Storm Home.

"Mine was the Kloeckls', an old couple who lived in a little green cottage by the lake. She kept a rock garden on the lake side, with terraces of alyssum, rising to a statue of the Blessed Virgin seated, and around her feet a bed of marigolds.... it looked like the home of the kindly old couple that the children lost in the forest suddenly come upon in a clearing and know they are lucky to be in a story with a happy ending. That was how I felt about the Kloeckls, after I got their name on a slip of paper and walked by their house and inspected it, though my family might have wondered about my assignment to a Catholic home, had they known. We

were suspicious of Catholics, enough to wonder if perhaps the Pope had ordered them to take in little Protestant children during blizzards and make them say the Rosary for their suppers. But I imagined the Kloeckls had personally chosen me as their storm child because they liked me. 'Him!' they had told Mr. Detman. 'In the event of a blizzard, we want that boy! The skinny one with the thick glasses!'

"No blizzard came during school hours that year, all the snowstorms were convenient evening or weekend ones, and I never got to stay with the Kloeckls, but they were often in my thoughts and they grew large in my imagination. My Storm Home. Blizzards aren't the only storms and not the worst by any means. I could imagine worse things. If the worst should come, I could go to the Kloeckls and knock on their door. 'Hello,' I'd say. 'I'm your storm child.'

"'Oh, I know,' she'd say. 'I was wondering when you'd come. Oh, it's good to see you. How would you like a hot chocolate and an oatmeal cookie?'

"We'd sit at the table. 'Looks like this storm is going to last awhile.'

"'Yes.'

"'Terrible storm. They say it's going to get worse before it stops. I just pray for anyone who's out in this.'

"'Yes.'

"'But we're so glad to have you. I can't tell you. Carl! Come down and see who's here!'

"'Is it the storm child?'

"'Yes! Himself, in the flesh!'" (pp. 248, 249)

The essence of Christianity is grace: unconditional love and acceptance, and the experience of value and self worth which results from it. That is what is good about the good news. It sounds simple but it isn't. It is so illusive, so powerful, so radical, that most of us don't understand it, spend most of our lives pursuing it and in frustration accepting substitutes for it. And so it is that the story, which is the vehicle of Good News, begins with an incident of grace.

We don't know what Jesus did between the age of twelve, when we last hear about him, and thirty, when he reappears one day on the banks of the Jordan River and is baptized by his cousin John. Scholarly speculation suggests that he lived at home, worked in his father's carpenter shop in Nazareth, earned a living - perhaps supporting his family after Joseph died, attended synagog and, in general, lived a fairly normal life for a Palestinian Jew of that time. Part of what Jesus of Nazareth surely did, was part of what all of us do in that time frame, namely get ready for the

rest of our lives: wait for, wonder about, struggle with options, experiment with - something called our vocation the purpose of our life, our calling, or what we hope to do when we grow up. I propose that our Lord's humanity was thorough enough that he came out to the river to hear John preach for the same reason that you or I suddenly decide to go to church, or a concern, or a lecture, or to hear an evangelist preach, on the outside chance that while we're there we'll get some clue about the meaning of our life. And while he was there listening to his cousin, John, flailing away at the hypocrisy and phoniness in Israel and how God demands righteousness and total commitment, Jesus came to some instant conclusions about the meaning of his own thirty year old life and what he wanted to do with the rest of it. And so, only slightly impetuously, he stepped into the muddy water and allowed John to baptize him, which John said was a way to be washed clean of the past and to begin life all over again, and for him the experience was so devastatingly beautiful that he must have told his disciples about it and they remembered it and told about it after he died. Now it is always precarious to try to recapture in words another person's private religious experience. But the words the Gospel writers chose are good ones, and memorable and haunting: "...the Spirit, like a dove descended upon him...' and that voice which he alone heard - 'You are my beloved Son - I am pleased with you - you are God's pleasure.'"

New Testament scholars teach us that in this incident Jesus received confirmation of his sonship and commissioning to his ministry. It was the event that launched him on a pilgrimage which would begin with a time of isolated aloneness in the desert, evolve through a three year career of teaching and healing, and end in execution on a cross. It is that, of course. But it is, first, an incredible experience of grace. Before it becomes confirmation and commissioning to mission, it is the almost unexplainable good personal sense of God's unconditional acceptance and love - and pleasure.

The religion we espouse begins here: not really with a set of philosophic propositions or moral imperatives, but with this experience between Jesus and God, between child and parent, creature and creator. It begins, that is to say, very near the heart of the universal human experience.

One doesn't have to look far for it. Your own life is a good starting place and the mirrors of our experience - the Arts and the Behavioral Sciences are full of reminders. Garrison Keillor, in the Storm Child story, knows about the human need for affirmation and grace. So does Alice Walker. Her remarkable novel, The Color Purple, and the stunning movie based on it is about the absolute human need for grace, the destructive and demonic propensity of life when it is deprived of it, and the potential for newness, for rebirth, for resurrection, where grace happens. It is the story of a black woman in the early decades of this century, who is utterly deprived of supportive, parental love, badly abused by the men in her life, and totally without any reminders of her personal value or worth. Her re-creation happens when grace and love is extended, by another woman: and the story ends powerfully with a remarkable sequence of reconciliations - most of them between estranged parents and their now grown children. It, too,

is commentary on the text for the day.

The Behavioral Sciences support the theological and artistic articulations of the theme. Dr. Haim Ginott, who wrote the parenting bible for people of my generation, Between Parent and Child, advises over and over, that "a child's greatest fear is being unloved and abandoned by his parents..." (p. 135-136)

Dr. Thomas Harris, wrote an enormously popular and helpful book, I'm OK - You're OK, which proposed that most of us spend most of our time trying to feel "OK" or trying to cope with the fact that we don't feel "OK" either about ourselves, or about others. That book touched a very responsive nerve in American culture by suggesting that a lot of what we do is dictated by our need to establish, document and demonstrate our worth as persons. It helped us see that obsessive work habits, called "workaholism," point to a personal need to feel valuable. It helped us see that the person who works early and late, never takes a day off and whose vacations are unwelcome interruptions - needs grace, not corporate encouragement. We learned that what we need from one another, in love, friendship, sexuality, collegiality, is a little acceptance, affirmation, a little unconditional love. And we continue to learn - although we seem grossly unwilling to do anything publically and politically about it, that the opposite of that grace and acceptance, - namely child abuse, by parents - or people abuse by the system - is the most dangerous and self-perpetuating and self-destructive dynamic in our culture. If we know anything for use about the human condition it is that people who have been told they don't matter, will - when they begin to believe it - act like human life doesn't matter. That truth, of course, has enormous implications for social policy and it is currently not very popular.

Our deepest need as persons is to be worth something...to matter to someone.

There was an embarrassingly human and honest moment during the Academy Awards last year, which most of us persist in watching without admitting it to our friends, when Sally Field, accepting the Best Actress Award, blurted out: "I can't deny the fact that you like me... you like me right now! You like me!"

When I try to comprehend why the early disciples decided to follow Jesus I conclude that it had something to do with this grace: some extension into their lives of the experience that changed his life - that momentary grace when he knew the love and pleasure of God. Somehow, with him, from him, in him, they were included in that powerful grace. Standing close to him, it flowed over them. And so, this grace, became and becomes the church's precious treasure. It is what we are about. It is what we celebrate. It is what we have to offer. Our basic reason for being is to remind each other of grace. In infant Baptism particularly we dramatize the Good News that God's love for us is a miracle, that we do nothing to earn it, that it falls on us like the soft rain of springtime. That sacrament, which historically, is at the heart of our tradition, is celebrated in worship and it includes an incredible affirmation about the innate, God-

given worthfulness of these human lives, and it includes a promise that our responsibility as church is to go on affirming the worthfulness of those lives in the years to come, and it includes, always, a reminder that we too were baptized, that whatever faith we espouse it was loved into us and out of us by a parent or some parent figure who became the instrument of God's grace for us.

The Good News is that the God who created us, loves us unconditionally. In Paul's words, "The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Chirst." (Romans 8:15-17)

The Reformers boldly proclaimed the radical Christian understanding that God calls all people: that our vocation is to become God's children: to act like God's children, to enjoy being God's children, to live a life of freedom and joy and peace because the God who created - loves us, is pleased with us.

Christian discipleship is arduous, demanding, sometimes dangerous business. But it begins with this grace, with God's pleasure, with the miracle of God's personal and unconditional love for you and me.

Sometimes, tragically, the church whose job it is to remember this secret, forgets it: and whose mission it is to celebrate this secret and shout it to the world and sing and dance it in the streets, makes the terrible mistake of hiding it, or worse yet misrepresenting it as a prize to be won by following the religious rules, or reciting the right creeds, or nodding at the orthodox doctrines, or voting for the right candidates, or submitting to the required emotional upheaval. Sometimes the church commits the monumental sin of proposing to the world that God loves and favors and graces and saves the people who say the right words and sign up with a particular tribe, and that all the rest are somehow outside God's grace, an extraordinary arrogance for which I trust God will remember his own standards of graciousness and at least maintain a sense of humor about human silliness.

It is an incredible suggestion. God loves us. Somehow, what was said to Jesus that day, is said to you and me: "You are my daughter - You are my son... I am pleased with you... You are the Pleasure of God."

There is a passage in one of Paul Tillich's books which his readers know for its simple eloquence on the topic. Tillich thought profoundly and often complexly about our faith. But here, he thought and wrote very humanly, and it means more to me now that I know that he had his own struggles. The philosopher-theologian wrote:

> "Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlesness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when...our weakness...our lack of direction...have become intolerable. It strikes us, when year after year, the longed-for perfection does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades,

when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is though a voice were saying, 'You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know... Do not ask for the name now: perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now: perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything... Simply accept the fact that you are accepted."

In the long history of our race it is the one word we have wanted to hear. We are, in fact, restless, until we find our rest in God. We are, in fact, ill-at-ease, anxious, until we know that we are accepted. In our personal pilgrimage it is the word we desperately need. Hear it, again, today. Hear it, as it was heard, by a thirty year old man, standing in the muddy water of the Jordan River, deciding what to do with the rest of his life. Hear it, where your are in your own life.

"You are my daughter.

You are my son.

I am pleased with you."

Amen.